



## Ramsey's Principle Re-Situated

Jérôme Dokic, Pascal Engel

### ► To cite this version:

Jérôme Dokic, Pascal Engel. Ramsey's Principle Re-Situated. Hugh Mellor. Ramsey, Oxford University Press, 2004. ijn\_00000515

**HAL Id: ijn\_00000515**

**[https://hal.science/ijn\\_00000515](https://hal.science/ijn_00000515)**

Submitted on 12 Jul 2004

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Ramsey's Principle Re-situated <sup>\*</sup>

Jérôme Dokic (EHESS, Institut Jean Nicod)

& Pascal Engel (Université Paris IV, Institut Jean Nicod)

---

## *Abstract.*

This paper is about Ramsey's Principle, according to which a belief's truth-conditions are those that guarantee the success of an action based on that belief whatever the underlying motivating desires. Some philosophers have argued that the Principle should be rejected because it leads to the apparently implausible consequence that any failure of action is the result of some false belief on the agent's part. There is a gap between action and success that cannot be bridged by the agent's cognitive state. At best, the Principle should be relativized to circumstances. We show on the contrary that when the Principle is properly understood, it does not amount to "overburdening" belief. We exploit an analogy between knowledge and action in order to show that intentional action is a source of knowledge relative to a set of beliefs whose collective truth guarantees the success of the action. It does not follow that the agent is explicitly representing all possible obstacles to her action. Most of the relevant beliefs are implicit, in the sense that *if* they were to be formed, they would be directly or indirectly justified by the agent's experience of acting.

## ***Ramsey's Principle and Success Semantics***

Let us consider what can be called "Ramsey's Principle". It is the principle that "truth *is* the property of a belief that suffices for your getting what you want when you act on it" (Whyte, 1990: 149). When an action results in getting what one wants, i.e. when it leads to the satisfaction of one's desires, the action is said to be successful. So, according to this principle, there is an internal relation between truth and success:

(RP) True beliefs are those that lead to successful actions whatever the underlying motivating desires.

---

<sup>\*</sup> The argument in what follows derives from Dokic & Engel (2002).

Ramsey's Principle should not be taken as a definition of truth. The conflation between RP and a theory of truth comes from the fact that one fails to distinguish *truth* (which can be understood in the minimalist sense " 'P' is true iff P") from *truth aptness*, i.e. whether P has truth conditions or not (Jackson, Oppy and Smith 1994, Engel 2002). RP is first and foremost about truth aptness.

*A fortiori* it should not be confused with a pragmatist definition of truth. As well known, Ramsey did not defend a pragmatist *definition* of truth, but argued instead for a version of the redundancy theory of truth<sup>1</sup>. However, in "Facts and Propositions", he exploited the idea that there is an internal relation between truth and success to suggest a pragmatist theory of the *contents* of at least some beliefs. The content of a belief is the conditions under which it is true. Now, even though Ramsey does not express himself in that way, we can derive from him the claim that a belief's truth-conditions are determined by its *success-conditions*.<sup>2</sup> RP' is an alternative formulation of RP which highlights this specific claim:

(RP') A belief's truth-conditions are those that guarantee the success of an action based on that belief whatever the underlying motivating desires (Whyte 1990, Mellor 1991, Papineau 1987, 1993).

Ramsey's Principle is often misunderstood. We cannot here deal with all the possible sources of misunderstanding, but two preliminary remarks are in order. The first is that truth-conditions are not to be identified with the *results* of action, which change according to the desire (or set of desires) involved. They are to be identified with the invariant conditions in the world that guarantee success whatever goal is pursued. According to Ramsey's Principle, these conditions are nothing but the state of affairs corresponding to the belief or, more simply and less emphatically, the belief's truth-conditions. Typically, the truth conditions which RP promises to derive from the conditions of success of actions are not those of our actual actions, but they are the truth conditions of the beliefs which *would* lead to actions. (This disposes of the familiar objection to pragmatism that a number of our beliefs which are actually useful in such or such circumstances turn out to be false)

Second, RP, as stated above, applies to *full* beliefs, those which we are disposed to judge as true or false, period. A common mistake consists in supposing that it applies to

---

<sup>1</sup> For the reasons why it is only a *quasi*- redundancy view, see Dokic & Engel 2002 : 23.

<sup>2</sup> Whyte (1990), Sahlin (1990: 70-72), Mellor (1991: 21-23).

partial beliefs – or to our subjective degrees of beliefs – as well. But if it did apply to these, RP would immediately turn out to be false, for the degree of our belief cannot guarantee the success of action. Suppose, for instance that my belief that it will rain tomorrow is only 0.5. It can combine with a desire not to risk a wet picnic, which in turn can cause me to stay at home tomorrow. But we cannot say that it is part of the success condition of my staying at home that either it will rain tomorrow or not. (Whyte 1990:156). Could we say, however, that a sufficiently high degree of belief (say 0.6) could guarantee the success of our actions? Couldn't we say that beliefs are more likely to be true when they lead to success more often than not, or even typically? Certainly such a relation seems plausible, given RP. But the high degree of partial belief does not warrant automatically the success of all the action to which they lead. This may seem to be a threat to the correctness of RP, since most of our belief are partial ones, even if we do not hold them consciously. After all, did not Ramsey himself famously say that “all our lives we are in a sense betting” (1990:79)? But this kind of objection rests upon a misunderstanding of Ramsey's Principle. In order to assign any degree to a belief, one must be able to give a content to that belief, and RP tells us that this belief's content or truth conditions are those which suffice for the success of the actions to which it would lead *if it were a full belief*. In this sense RP is presupposed by decision theory when it assigns degrees to our beliefs. The assignment of content to our beliefs through their success conditions is thus more fundamental than the assignment of degrees to these through the actions that we perform.<sup>3</sup>

It is now customary to call “success semantics” the philosophical project of deriving truth-conditions from success-conditions. According to many writers, Ramsey's Principle should be supplemented by a teleological account of our beliefs and desires. Success semantics, they claim, is necessarily a “teleosemantics”, for the contents of our beliefs (and desires) are determined, at least in part, by their biological functions, including adaptative ones.<sup>4</sup> RP seems to fit quite well in the teleosemantical picture. However, there is some controversy about the nature of the relationship between Ramsey's Principle and teleology. There are at least four options:<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Although we cannot argue for this here, this feature is closely related to the fact that the step of practical reasoning leading to action – what Searle (1983) calls the “intention in action”, is made through *categorical* judgements. See, however, below, about the connexions between knowledge and action.

<sup>4</sup> Sahlin (1990: 72) mentions this point about the famous chicken/caterpillar example given by Ramsey in “Facts and Propositions”. Defenders of teleosemantics include Millikan (1984), Dretske (1988), McGinn (1989), Papineau (1987), (1993), Jacob (1997).

<sup>5</sup> We do not exclude that some of these options can be combined.

- (a) The contents of beliefs *and* desires are directly defined by their biological functions or purposes.
- (b) Teleological considerations are relevant for explaining the *normal functioning* of the formation mechanisms of beliefs and desires, in particular their causal roles in the production of action.
- (c) Ramsey's Principle needs a teleological definition of the satisfaction conditions of *desires*, from which it can derive a definition of the truth conditions of beliefs.
- (d) Ramsey's Principle, in its absolute version, is in fact *false*. Truth guarantees success only in a *normal* context, and teleological considerations are needed to define what a normal context is (relative to the organism).

The first option has been defended by Papineau (1993, 1994). According to him, beliefs have the biological functions of leading to success when they are true. This is what he calls their primary purposes, to be distinguished from their secondary purposes. For instance, the belief that one is not going to be injured in the ensuing conflict, though false, has the secondary purpose of getting people to fight effectively. Success semantics comes into the picture precisely to isolate primary purposes, since it equates the truth conditions of beliefs *specifically* with the conditions under which beliefs contribute to the satisfaction of desires.

According to defenders of option (b), beliefs do not have biological functions from which one could directly read off their contents. For instance, Millikan argues that the content of a representation does not rest “on the function of the representation or of the consumer, on what these do”. There is no such a thing “as behaving like a representation of X or as being treated like a representation of X” (1993: 89). Millikan introduces a distinction between the *production* and the *consumption* of representations in a cognitive system. She deplores, rightly to our mind, that most theories of representation almost exclusively focus on the production conditions of representations to the detriment of their consumption conditions. This is particularly true of “informational” or “causal co-variance” theories, which try to define the content of a representation by reference to what *causes* the representation.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, according to Millikan, the content of a representation is entirely fixed by the ways it is used in the cognitive system to which it belongs. Of course, one can invoke teleological

---

<sup>6</sup> Roughly, informational or causal co-variance theories define the content of a token representation by reference to the information it carries, or the information that any token of that type has the function of carrying. Such information is defined in its turn by the laws, most often causal, which link the referent to the production of a token representation. See Fodor (1990), Jacob (1997).

considerations in order to deal with the conditions under which the representation is produced. For instance, one can suppose that one of the *functions* of the visual system is to produce representations that accord with reality, in other words, *veridical* representations. This function of the visual system, though, does not enter the definition of the content of a particular visual representation, which is determined by the way it is consumed, eventually by the kinds of behavioural control it can exert.

Millikan nonetheless claims that *other* teleological considerations are relevant to defining the contents of our beliefs. The consumer part of a cognitive system has a biological function which has been selected for by evolution. According to Millikan, it is not directly the *function* of the consumer part which determines the content of a belief, for the use of a given belief can have an indefinite number of results, depending on the subject's context and other propositional attitudes. Rather, the content of a belief is determined by the "Normal conditions" of functioning of the consumer part. The phrase "Normal conditions" is a term of art in Millikan's account. The conditions under which a system is functioning "Normally" are not necessarily those in which the subject is most often (this would correspond to the statistical sense of "normally"), but (roughly) those in which it exerts the function which it or its ancestors have been selected for in the past.

Options (c) and (d) constitute quite different arguments for teleosemantics. According to (c), Ramsey's Principle cannot get off the ground without an independent account of the satisfaction conditions of desires. RP defines the contents of beliefs in terms of the satisfaction conditions of the underlying motivating desires, *i.e.* of their contents. The partnership between RP and teleology should be understood as follows: success semantics is a theory of the contents of beliefs, and teleosemantics is an account of the contents of desires.

According to (d), RP should be rejected in its absolute form. Truth does not guarantee success in every situation; at best, truth leads to success in a normal environment. RP should then be relativized to the context. Now, an environment is "normal" only if the agent has been adapted to it. The notion of adaptation is teleological, which means that success semantics must also be a teleosemantics.

We cannot consider here all these options. In Dokic and Engel 2002, we argue against (c), that one cannot have an independent account of the satisfaction conditions of desires. Moreover, it could be argued (Whyte 1993) against Papineau's version that his distinction between normal or primary purposes of beliefs has the effect of making teleology redundant. (RP) just explains truth conditions in terms of the fulfilment of desires. But adding that desires must bring about ends which are favoured by natural selection adds nothing. Our

argument here will be targeted specifically at (d): we shall claim that when the notion of adaptation is well-understood, there is no need to relativize Ramsey's Principle to circumstances. This leaves us with options (a) and (b). We cannot go into details here, but let us remark that on either account, there is a sense in which teleological considerations play only a "pre-semantic" role. Perry (1997) introduces the distinction between semantic and pre-semantic uses of context. In the case of the interpretation of utterances, context is used pre-semantically in order to determine the language, the words and the linguistic meaning. For instance, the considerations that make a given proper name, say "Emile Ajar", connected to a particular man, in the case in point Romain Gary, play a pre-semantic role according to Perry. In general, the considerations operating at the pre-semantic level do not have to enter the definition of the propositional contents of utterances, which is a semantic matter. Thus, it is not part of the *meaning* of the proper name "Emile Ajar" that it has been introduced as a guise by Romain Gary. Similarly, although teleological considerations are relevant to determine the contents of our beliefs and desires, they play a pre-semantic role. *Given* an organism with beliefs and desires, i.e. given that their normal causal roles in an organism are in place, RP can be used to derive their truth and satisfaction conditions. Teleological factors are not part of the *contents* of our beliefs and desires. The success-conditions of an action are facts which are coeval with the action; typically, in themselves they have nothing to do with the historical conditions in which our cognitive system has evolved. In this respect our defense of RP does not commit us to a form of naturalistic account of content (although we do not claim that it is incompatible with such an account).

Perhaps the divergence between our understanding of success semantics and the various versions of teleosemantics can be formulated thus. Both success semantics and teleosemantics give sense to the familiar claim that "truth is the aim of belief": truth is what our beliefs are directed to if our actions are to succeed. In this sense, both make room for the idea that truth is in some sense "normative" for belief formation. According to Papineau (1999), a teleosemanticist can perfectly account for this normative feature, by arguing that the general fact that we value true beliefs simply flows from the very connection that success semantics postulates between true beliefs and the satisfaction of desires:

*If you act appropriately on true beliefs, then your actions are guaranteed to satisfy your desires, and indeed [...]this pragmatic connection [is] a crucial component in the analysis of truth conditional content [...] And this pragmatic connection does mean that there is always a species of derived personal value to truth in beliefs that are relevant to*

action, for such truth will always help you to find a way of satisfy whatever desires you have.( Papineau 1999: 26)

Now Papineau emphasises the fact that, on this view, truth, as a value or a norm, is the *external* aim or goal of belief. On our view, however, Ramsey's principle flows from an *internal* relation between the truth of beliefs and their success, and truth is the internal "aim of belief".<sup>7</sup> When an agent acts, and when he action is successful, the very fact that it is so implies that his beliefs are true. We could stress the contrast by saying that for the teleosemanticist truth is the distal , or external , aim of belief, whereas for success semantics as we conceive of it, truth is the proximal, or direct, aim.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Objections to Ramsey's Principle from Situated Cognition***

One of the (apparently) most damaging objections against Ramsey's Principle is that it neglects the fact that human action is situated in a context. The Principle implies that any failure of action is the result of some *false* belief on the agent's part. For if all the agent's beliefs are true, the action cannot be but successful. This would seem both to overintellectualise action (by making it, when it fails, the product of false *beliefs* about it) and to overload the cognitive background of beliefs needed for any action.

It is of course plausible that *some* failures can be traced to false beliefs. I try to drink from a particular glass because I believe that it contains something that will quench my thirst. If my belief is false and the glass is empty, I won't get what I want. However, it is much less plausible, from a cognitive point of view, to suppose that any possible failure of an action corresponds to some false belief or representation on the agent's part. Robert Brandom

---

<sup>7</sup> On this internal reading of the aim of beliefs, as opposed to the teleological external one, see Engel, *to appear*. The fact that success semantics allows us to account for the truth-directedness of belief makes room for the normative dimension of belief. This point is also emphasised, although in a different way, by Simon Blackburn in his contribution to this volume.

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, there is some truth to Horwich's criticism of a principle which is close to RP (Horwich 1998), which he claims to be trivial and merely a logical consequence of the fact that our actions presuppose true instrumental beliefs. According to Horwich, his own minimalist conception of truth has no difficulty in explaining the desirability of truth, for any instrumental belief of the form "If I do A, then I will get result R" will, if the action is successful, be true. Call such a belief (D). Then an agent who wants to satisfy a desire to get R will want it to be the case that *If I believe that D, then D*, which, by the familiar equivalence principle is equivalent to *If I believe that D, then that D is true*. According to Horwich, generalising leads us to conclude that *All our directly action guiding (instrumental ) beliefs are true*. Horwich concludes that there is no need to postulate an external and intrinsic goal of truth. We agree, but it does not make RP and success semantics trivial for that. On the contrary, we say that it allows for a substantial link between belief (and knowledge) and action.



remarks that “ignorance is no less a threat than error to the positive guarantee of practical success that [Ramsey’s Principle] seeks to identify with truth” (1994 : 175-6). Suppose that I do not get what I want because the glass is glued to the table. According to Ramsey’s Principle, it seems that I should have the belief that the glass is *not* glued to the table, whose falsity explains the failure of my action. However, the fact that I tried to raise my glass shows at best that I did *not* have the positive belief that it was glued to the table, but it in no way indicates my having the negative belief needed to vindicate Ramsey’s Principle, namely the belief that it was *not* glued to the table. In general, there is no guarantee that, in every particular case of action, there is a plausible cognitive level intermediary between a general but trivial belief that there are “no impediments” and a non-denumerable set of beliefs corresponding to each possible failure of the action.

In the same vein, John Perry contends that Ramsey’s Principle in its absolute form amounts to “overburdening” belief. He writes:

[L]et us first note how unrealistic it would be to suppose that the content of beliefs fix all of the circumstances relevant to the success of our action. Consider the force of gravitation. If I am in space or on the moon or in some other situation where gravitational forces are much diminished, the movement we envisage me making in the example will not lead to getting a drink; the water would fly out of the glass all over my face – or perhaps I would not even grab the glass, but instead propel myself backwards. If all possible failures are to be accounted for by false beliefs, the corresponding true beliefs must be present when we succeed. So, when I reach for the glass, I must believe that the forces of gravity are just what they need to be for things to work out right. (1993: 202)

According to Perry, the gap between action and success cannot be bridged by the agent’s cognitive state only (i.e. the set of her beliefs). At best, the truth of a belief guarantees the success of an action only relative to a normal context (for instance on earth), whose identity conditions need not be known by the agent.

Of course, Ramsey himself would not be much impressed by Brandom’s and Perry’s objections from situated cognition. If Ramsey’s Principle is relativized to circumstances, it becomes false *by definition*; any reference to a normal context should be blindly included in the belief’s truth-conditions. However, even if this response is (we think) correct, it does not go far enough. Brandom and Perry make appeal to our pre-theoretical intuitions about the

contents of our beliefs. They argue that Ramsey's Principle delivers truth-conditions which are at odds with these intuitions. The principle would be strengthened if we could show that it is in fact compatible with them.

### ***Ramsey's Principle re-situated***

In the rest of this paper, we shall defend Ramsey's Principle in its absolute form against the foregoing objections. Our defence is based on an analogy between knowledge and action.

As a first and rough approximation, knowledge is the exclusion of alternatives incompatible with the subject's claim of knowing. In a Cartesian-like epistemology, the subject must exclude *all* these alternatives, i.e. have knowledge that they are not the case. For instance, knowing that there is a glass in front of me requires knowing that my visual system is in good order, that I am not dreaming, etc., for these alternatives would certainly preclude my knowledge of the glass if they were the case. What is at stake here is a version of what is sometimes called a Principle of Epistemic Closure:

(PEC) If I know that  $p$ , and  $q$  implies that I do not, I know that  $q$  is not the case.

Here,  $q$  is an alternative with respect to my claim of knowing that  $p$ . I cannot be said to know that  $p$  if I do not know whether  $q$  is the case or not. So every piece of knowledge presupposes many other pieces of knowledge with their own sets of alternatives, which I must rule out in turn.

A conception of knowledge based on PEC runs into familiar difficulties. For instance, I cannot know anything on the basis of perception unless I know that I am not dreaming or hallucinating. However, either the latter piece of knowledge cannot be established by perception at all, or it can be established by other perceptual experiences, which raises essentially the same problems. So perceptual knowledge is either impossible or circular.

The "relevant alternatives" view of knowledge has been proposed in response to these difficulties.<sup>9</sup> On this view, knowledge is the exclusion of *relevant* alternatives only. What

---

<sup>9</sup> Dretske (1970), Nozick (1981).

counts as a relevant alternative, and thus as knowledge, depends upon the context <sup>10</sup>. To borrow an example from Austin, knowledge that a perceived bird is a goldfinch might depend, in some contexts, on whether there are other similar birds *in fact* present in my locality. It is then assumed that the alternative that I am dreaming is not relevant in ordinary contexts in which I claim to know that it is raining by looking out the window.

The “relevant alternatives” view in effect rejects the implication in PEC by relativizing knowledge to circumstances. Some remarks of Michael Williams on epistemic closure suggest an alternative way out of the difficulties associated with PEC, which does not require making knowledge context-dependent.<sup>11</sup> These difficulties arise from what we call a *temporal* interpretation of PEC. On such an interpretation, knowing that it is raining by looking out the window requires that I *first and independently* acquire the knowledge that my eyes are in good order.

On another, *logical* interpretation, my knowledge that it is raining and my knowledge that my eyes are in good order can have the same *source*, for instance my experience of looking out the window. If I am in a position to acquire the former piece of knowledge, I am *also and simultaneously* in a position to acquire the latter piece of knowledge. In general, if I am in a position to acquire the knowledge that *p*, I am *thereby* in a position to acquire the knowledge that not-*q*, for any alternative *q* incompatible with my knowing that *p*.

PEC, even on its logical interpretation, is still too strong. It neglects the fact that my knowledge that it is raining and my knowledge that my eyes are not in good order are not cognitively on a par. Typically, only the former piece of knowledge is explicit and based on direct evidence. I *visually perceive* that it is raining, but I do not perceive that my eyes are in

---

<sup>10</sup> These views are also usually associated to so-called contextualist solutions to scepticism. See for instance the papers in DeRose and Warfield 1999

<sup>11</sup> Williams (1991: Ch. 8). In fact, Williams’s target is a different version of the Principle of Epistemic Closure, according to which if someone knows that *p*, and knows that *p* implies *q*, then she knows that *q*. PEC in the text is stronger than this principle, on two counts: it takes into account a larger set of alternatives (namely all alternatives incompatible with one’s knowing, which includes but is not restricted to the set of alternatives incompatible with what is known), and it does not require that the subject *know* that the alternatives are incompatible with her putative knowledge.

Williams rejects the KK principle (the principle that if one knows, one knows that one knows), which is a consequence of PEC. We cannot go into the discussion of this principle here. See in particular Williamson 2000. Actually Williams intends to defend a contextualist conception of knowledge, whereas our view about knowledge and action here is non contextualist.

Perhaps PEC should be modified to block the possibility of bootstrapping oneself into knowing that one knows. However, the principle that if someone knows that *p*, and knows that *p* implies *q*, then she knows that *q*, is too weak, for it neglects the possibility of *reflective* knowledge, such as the knowledge that I am not hallucinating based on my perceptual experience. If the neutralist conception of experience is rejected, it can be argued that my *perception* that *p*, which is essentially factive, is accessible to reflection or introspection, and thus can indirectly justify the belief that I am not hallucinating.

good order. In order to give justice to the cognitive asymmetries between what I claim to know and what follows from my claim of knowing, two distinctions should be introduced, between implicit and explicit knowledge, and between direct and indirect justification.

First, the knowledge that my eyes are in good order, or that I am not dreaming, is rarely, perhaps never made explicit. The claim under consideration is only that *if* the subject were to form the corresponding beliefs, they would be justified by the very same experience which justifies her actual belief that it is raining. Second, the justification of the former beliefs need not be as direct as the justification of the latter belief. The exclusion of an alternative to the subject's claim to knowing can be *indirectly* justified on the basis of her perceptual experience. Indirect justification can be inferential or reflective. One can gain knowledge that this is not fake rain by *inferring* it from one's perceptual knowledge that it is raining. More controversially, one can gain knowledge that one is not dreaming by *reflecting* on one's experience with a non-sceptical attitude.

On such a view, PEC is essentially correct, but it needs a less misleading formulation in terms of implicit knowledge:

(PEC\*) If I know that *p*, and *q* implies that I do not, I at least implicitly know that *q* is not the case.

In general, I have at least implicit knowledge that *p* if and only if I am in a position to acquire such knowledge, whether or not I exercise the inferential and reflective capacities needed to actually know that *p*.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to us that (PEC\*) is consonant with Ramsey's famous account of knowledge, when he says :

We say "I know", however, whenever we are certain, without reflecting on reliability. But if we did reflect, then we should be certain if, and only if, we thought our way reliable. (1990:110)

Here Ramsey rejects explicitly the condition (known as the "KK principle") that in order to know that *p* one needs to know that one knows that *p*. In Williams' terminology the

---

<sup>12</sup> Compare with Williamson's (2000: 128) remarks about the distinction between *knowing* and *being in position to know* (neither of which, according to him, imply the KK principle)

reliability conditions for a given item of knowledge do not number among the entailments of what is known (1991:347).<sup>13</sup> (PEC\*) does not imply the KK principle.

The temporal interpretation of PEC is naturally associated with a *neutralist* conception of perceptual experience. According to this conception, perception is not a genuine source of objective knowledge. The best that I can learn from my experience of looking out the window is that it *seems* to be raining. Perceptual experience is *neutral* with respect to the truth of the objective beliefs that are normally grounded on it, such as the belief that it is raining. Whether or not my belief is true, my experience remains in essence the same.

In contrast, the logical interpretation of PEC is naturally associated with the *rejection* of the neutralist conception of perception, more precisely with what is sometimes called a “disjunctive” theory of experience.<sup>14</sup> When my perceptual experience is veridical, the perceived fact that *p* manifests itself to me, so that the proposition “It seems to me that *p*” is not the most precise characterization of what is going on in my cognitive space. There is a real, cognitive distinction between a situation in which a fact manifests itself to me in perception, and a situation in which I am only under the impression that this is so. As a consequence, a transition from my experience of looking out the window to a belief that I am not hallucinating would be warranted. In Burge (1993)’s terminology, I am *entitled* to make such a transition, given that the occurrence of the experience implies the truth of the belief.

We are aware that much more needs to be said about epistemic principles of closure. However, our aim in this paper is not to defend a detailed epistemological outlook, but to point out an analogy between knowledge and action. The analogy we are interested in is between PEC and the following Principle of Pragmatic Closure:

(PPC) If I am intentionally doing *p*, and *q* implies that I am not, I know that *q* is not the case.

Here, the phrase “doing *p*” is used to imply success: just as knowing that *p*, doing *p* implies *p*. So *q* can be any alternative to the success of the action of doing *p*.<sup>15</sup> PPC is not exactly analogous to PEC, for it does not state that in order to do *p*, I must *do* whatever is

---

<sup>13</sup> see Dokic and Engel 2002, p.29.

<sup>14</sup> Hinton (1973), McDowell (1982). However, cf. Williamson (2000: Ch 1) for doubts about some versions of disjunctive theories. What is important for our purpose is the rejection of so-called “conjunctive” theories, such as the neutralist conception of experience.

<sup>15</sup> In the knowledge case, there is a distinction between an alternative to what is claimed to be known and an alternative to one’s claim of knowing. The analogous distinction in the action case is between an alternative to what is done and an alternative to one’s doing it. There are two different notions of success, here – Ramsey’s being the former.

necessary to lift any obstacle to my making it the case that  $p$ . This would be utterly implausible, leading to permanent procrastination. PPC is not so obviously wrong. It states that if  $q$  implies the failure of my action of doing  $p$ , I must know that  $q$  is false. PPC is in fact a stronger version of Ramsey's Principle, according to which the beliefs underlying a particular action should amount to knowledge, or at least should be sufficiently warranted. It is not enough that the agent *holds* the beliefs whose collective truth guarantees success; the action counts as intentional only if these beliefs are themselves epistemically well-grounded.

PPC is consonant with the spirit of Williamson's (2000) claim that the place of belief and desire in the economy of mental life depends on their connection with knowledge and action and with the idea that knowledge is prior to belief in the understanding of action. Belief emerges only when mind is maladapted to world, just as desire emerges only when world is maladapted to mind. On this view, PPC is not just a variant of Ramsey's Principle; on the contrary, the versions of Ramsey's Principle formulated in terms of belief and desire are *derived* from the more fundamental PPC.

As in the knowledge case, there is an issue about whether a relativization strategy is needed at this point. In particular, those who find PPC implausible might try to relativize Ramsey's Principle to circumstances. I do not need to know that the glass is not glued to the table in order to intentionally raise the glass. I just have to *try*; if the circumstances are normal, the glass will be raised. My action still counts as intentional, even though strictly speaking, it is the outcome of a joint collaboration with (benevolent) Mother Nature.

The alternative option is to distinguish between a temporal and a logical interpretation of PPC. Principle PPC won't seem plausible if it is interpreted temporally, as if I should know that the glass is not glued to the table *before and independently* of my action of raising the glass. According to the rival, logical interpretation, I do not have to know that the glass is not glued to the table before acting; rather, my action of raising the glass puts me in a position to know that the glass was not glued to the table (while I was acting). Action itself is a source of knowledge about the absence of any obstacle to it. Such knowledge is not acquired *before* action; at best, it is a logical *consequence* of its occurrence.

According to the logical interpretation of PPC, intentional action is a source of knowledge relative to a set of beliefs whose collective truth guarantees the success of the action. As with PEC, it does not follow that the agent is explicitly representing all possible obstacles to her action. Most of the relevant beliefs are implicit, in the sense that *if* they were to be formed, they would be directly or indirectly justified by the agent's *experience of acting*. Normally, the agent does not form them, on pain of being distracted from what she's trying to

do. So on the logical interpretation, the consequent of PPC should be qualified in the same way as that of PEC:

(PPC\*) If I am intentionally doing  $p$ , and  $q$  implies that I am not, I at least implicitly know that  $q$  is not the case.

What is it about the experience of acting which can knowledgably rule out the alternatives to my intentionally making it the case that  $p$ ? To begin with, the fact that action is controlled by perception at the subdoxastic level is a source of knowledge about the agent's orientation relative to the target of her action, the development of the bodily gesture, and many other parameters. Moreover, most of these parameters are not fixed in advance but change during the course of action, which is another indication that the corresponding beliefs cannot be explicit. Non-conceptual perception of *affordances* yields other beliefs which are instrumental in form, about what one can do and what would be the consequences of one's doing it in the present circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

Can *all* the beliefs underlying an action be implicit? The answer might be positive for *spontaneous* actions, if they exist. Searle pointed out that there are actions which are not caused by any prior intentions, such as the spontaneous action of pacing about the room while reflecting on a philosophical problem.<sup>17</sup> If these actions are genuinely intentional, they must be able to ground a set of beliefs whose collective truth guarantees success. However, none of these beliefs needs to be formed before acting.

The distinction between a neutralist and a disjunctive account of perceptual experience has an analogue in the action case. According to a neutralist conception of action, the best that I can do is *try* to move my body. Action is *neutral* with respect to its success conceived as the satisfaction of the underlying objective desires, such as the desire to raise my arm. Whether or not I succeed in actually raising my arm, I am doing essentially the same thing, viz. *trying to raise it*. This conception is naturally associated with the temporal interpretation of PPC, for there is no physical action such that I can know in advance that there won't be any obstacles to its success. Such knowledge is possible only for tryings to move one's body, which in a sense cannot fail.

---

<sup>16</sup> As Bermúdez (1998: 118) rightly says, "To say that affordances are directly perceived is precisely to say that instrumental relations can feature in the content of perception".

<sup>17</sup> Searle (1983: 84).

In contrast, the rejection of the neutralist conception of action is in line with the logical interpretation of PPC. According to a disjunctive account of action, a particular trying is either a mere trying, which is a failed action, or a genuine (i.e. successful) action. So an action can have intrinsic success-conditions which go beyond the mere trying to do something. The possibility is then open that one's experience of acting, which is essentially psycho-physical, is a source of knowledge about the action's external success-conditions.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, Ramsey's Principle in its absolute form is untouched by considerations about situated cognition. In particular, the objection of cognitive overload is answered by distinguishing between implicit and explicit knowledge. Ramsey's Principle and the stronger Principle of Pragmatic Closure concern in fact all warranted beliefs *accessible* to the agent, whether or not she actually holds them. The agent must only have the *means* of forming a set of warranted beliefs whose truth guarantees the success of her action.

However, the best argument in favour of Ramsey's Principle is transcendental, in the sense that it embodies a condition of possibility of intentional action. Some of those, like Perry, who want to relativize the Principle to circumstances invoke the agent's adaptation to her environment in order to justify their claim that the agent does not act with a full awareness of all possible obstacles. Ironically, the objection of cognitive overload does not stand precisely because agents are normally adapted to their environment. Adaptation is not a purely external relation between an agent and its environment, as if the former happened to "fit" the latter. Rather, adaptation manifests itself in the fact that action is normally a source of knowledge about its own success-conditions. This is another aspect of the internal relation between knowledge and action which Ramsey much emphasised. Our actions' success-conditions reflect themselves on the subject's cognitive state, if only implicitly, because the agent's contribution and that of Mother Nature are so intertwined that it is impossible to tell them apart.

## **References**

Brandom, R. 1994 "Unsuccessful semantics", *Analysis*, 54.3, 175-178



- Burge, T., 1993, "Content Preservation", *Philosophical Review* 102, 457-488.
- Bermudez, J. 1998 *The Paradox of Self consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass. , MIT Press
- DeRose, K. and Warfield T.A., eds, *Scepticism, a contemporary Reader*, Oxford University Press, 1999
- Dokic, J. & Engel, P., 2002, *Ramsey. Truth and Success*, London: Routledge.
- Dretske, F., 1970, "Epistemic Operators", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 64, No 24, 1007-1023.
- Engel, P. 2002, *Truth*, Chesham: Acumen
- to appear "Truth and the Aim of Belief", in D. Gillies, ed. *Laws and Models in Science*, London: King's College Publications
- Fodor, J. 1990 *A theory of Content and Other Essays*, Cambridge Mass, MIT Press
- Hinton, J., 1973, *Experiences*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jackson, F, Oppy, G, & Smith, M.1994 "Minimalism and Truth Aptness", *Mind* 103, 287-302
- Jacob, P. 1997 *What minds can do*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Loewer, B. 1993 "The Value of Truth", in Villanueva, E., ed. *Naturalism and normativity*, *Philosophical Issues*, 4, 265-280
- McDowell, J., 1982, "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. LXVIII, 455-479.
- Mellor, D. H., 1991, *Matters of Metaphysics*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Millikan, R. G., 1993, *White Queen Psychology and Other Essays for Alice*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.
- Nozick, R., 1981, *Philosophical Explanations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Papineau, D. 1987 *Reality and Representation*, Oxford: Blackwell
- 1993 *Philosophical Naturalism*, Oxford: Blackwell
- 1999 "Normativity and Judgment", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society* , supp. vol LXXIII, 17-43
- Perry, J., 1993, *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays*, Oxford: OUP.
- Ramsey, F. P., 1991, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. D. H. Mellor, Cambridge: CUP.
- Sahlin, N. E., 1990, *The Philosophy of F. P. Ramsey*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Searle, J., 1983, *Intentionality*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Whyte, J., 1990, "Success Semantics", *Analysis*, 50, 149-157.
- 1993, "Purpose and Content", *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 44-45-60
- Williams, M., 1991, *Unnatural Doubts. Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Williamson, T. 2000, *Knowledge and its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press